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## THE WORLD'S CHAMPION FIDDLER'S FESTIVAL AT CROCKETT: AN EAST TEXAS TRADITION

JOE ANGLE

Every year in the small East Texas town of Crockett fiddlers from around the state and the nation gather at the Davy Crockett Memorial Park. Here the most skillful fiddler present is chosen. The winner is something more than the best performer present for this musician also carries the title of World's Champion Fiddler. However, a description of this contest is incomplete if it stops with only the fiddler. For those attending, it is a social event of great significance.

On the northeast side of the semicircle of parked cars and pickups is located the pavilion (a euphemism for a large, tin roofed shed), under which the contest is held. Here people gather to hear the music they have grown up with, meet their friends, to get in some gossip, and to judge fiddlers. Almost everyone considers himself a judge of fiddlers. In front of the pavilion, under a large shade tree sits a wooden barrel full of water, with the name of the local funeral home printed on its side. On the south side are concession stands operated by the Festival's sponsoring organization, Beta Sigma Phi. Also on this side is the registration table, shaded by a tent with Waller Funeral Home also printed on it. Also on the same side, a bit further east, is a group of chairs in which the contestants sit to await their chance at the prize money.

About seventy-five yards to the east of this area is a row of trees that follows the winding road through the park. Under the shade of these trees cars have been parked, and around these cars groups of fiddlers and guitar players gather for impromptu jam-sessions. About four or five fiddlers and a couple of guitar players usually make up one of these groups. They agree upon one song and play it in its traditional key. Each takes his turn and plays until he is finished with his version or until one of the others in the group takes up the lead. When each has had his turn, they stop and chat a while before beginning another song. This is not indigenous to Crockett, because it happens at all fiddling contests.<sup>1</sup> This gives the fiddler a chance to hear and size-up his opponents and try to judge what kind of day he will have. This idea of the "good day" is quite strong among the old-time fiddlers. There are so many fiddlers of near equal skill that this plays a prominent part among the contestants in justifying the choice of the winner.<sup>2</sup>

These informal sessions also provide an opportunity to get in all the fiddle playing desired. If the fiddler relied solely on his performance, that would mean only about five minutes of playing time. But, perhaps the most important function of the session is that it is a chance for the fiddler to meet and visit with old friends. There is a strong spirit of camaraderie among fiddlers. A large percentage of them know each other. Since they share in a unique talent and make some of the other contests, like those at Gilmer, Hurst, Athens, Pasa-dena, or Yoakum, close relationships are usually cemented. The following will illustrate this truth:

Roy Garner, a perennial master of ceremonies of the Crockett Festival, took a group of past champions to Hemisfair to perform. Every night after their performance they would gather at their motel and play until

the early hours of the morning. When the group broke up Sunday night Garner went back to Crockett, but E. J. Hopkins and some other fiddlers gathered again at the motel. They played until early Monday morning. Hopkins then drove from San Antonio to Houston to start work that same morning as a city policeman.<sup>3</sup>

It is also under these trees at Crockett that a picnic lunch is often taken from the trunk of a car or off the tailgate of a pickup. This is also the place where the observers and the participants partake of the beer that theoretically is forbidden. Most people sit under the pavilion, but a large number of them mill around over the grounds. There are people sitting under trees, people at the concession stands, kids playing chase, and scattered about are occasional pallets on which perspiring children and adults are lying.

These contests have not always been as they are in Crockett. In earlier times in rural community gatherings among the events scheduled would be a fiddlers contest if more than one fiddler was present. Frequently, they were quite informal and only concerned one community or one county.

The fiddlers would sometimes meet without other types of contestants to find out who was "give up" as the best fiddler.<sup>4</sup> If it was not a contest, perhaps it was just a chance for fiddlers to get together or to play for a box supper or ice cream social. In Crockett, there had been "get-togethers" of fiddlers at the north end of town or at the home of V. B. Tunstall some years before the beginning of the fiddler's festival.<sup>5</sup> In Athens, Texas, a contest grew out of a farmer's study course in 1932.<sup>6</sup>

The date and location of the first formal contest is in doubt. Both Texas fiddlers and those from the southeast claim that distinction. While no date can be agreed upon, most people put it sometime around the turn of the century.<sup>7</sup> One contest, the annual Atlanta, Georgia, Old Fiddler's Convention, presumably began as early as the 1880's.<sup>8</sup>

By the 1920's, notices in newspapers began to appear.<sup>9</sup> It was in 1925 that Stephen Vincent Benet published his "The Mountain Whippoorwill or How Hillbilly Jim Won the Great Fiddler's Prize." Gid Tanner of the popular "Skillet Lickers" appeared frequently at fiddlers conventions around the Atlanta, Georgia, area from the early 1900's into the 1920's. Most of the contests were local because of the difficulty of travel.

The guiding light for the Crockett Fiddlers Festival was V. B. Tunstall, Sr., known in the area as "Barker." Barker Tunstall was the eighteenth child of a family of nineteen (his father married again after his first wife died and lived to be ninety-nine). Tunstall, from an early age, had been interested in music. He first studied music at the age of six under a certain Mr. Mayer, who opened an opera house in Crockett. Even though Barker Tunstall received this formal training and was quite fond of classical music, he also remained true to his quasi-rural rearing and was very appreciative of the old fiddle tunes. He ended up making his living quite close to music. When he was about twenty, he travelled to Galveston, where he studied piano tuning. He travelled about over the countryside on horseback or on a bicycle tuning pianos. He was never a man to let business interfere too strongly with one of his great loves, music. While he went about his work, he carried his violin and when he got the chance he

would have a "set-to" with one of his customers or with one of the families along his way, playing the old fiddle songs or perhaps a bit of more recent music that often came in sheet music form.<sup>10</sup>

Tunstall was also the man one contacted on matters concerning music in the Houston County area. Besides tuning pianos and doing some barbering, he taught music (mainly strings) in several towns in the area, such as Corrigan and Trinity. In a time when people were entertained by less sophisticated media than today, Tunstall provided entertainment with the assistance of his ten children. He divided them into two troops and travelled about the area performing variety shows for different groups. If someone needed musical entertainment for a cotton festival or a fiddler for a fair or dance, he sought out Barker Tunstall for the arrangements.<sup>11</sup> He also amused his friends with the construction of musical instruments out of common tools and appliances like rakes and shovels or xylophones out of water-filled jars.<sup>12</sup>

It was this musical man who was to lead in the establishment of an annual event that has lasted more than thirty-two years, the World's Champion Fiddlers' Festival. In fact, his name became so closely connected with the contest that it was often referred to as "Barker Tunstall's Old Fiddler's Festival,"<sup>13</sup> and after he died, succeeding contests were dedicated in his memory.<sup>14</sup>

One day in 1937, Tunstall, along with Terry VanPelt, Raymond Cornelius, W. E. Keeland, and Homer Galloway gathered in Cornelius's hotel. They believed that the old fiddling tunes of their fathers were in danger of becoming extinct, so in a preservative mood they made preliminary plans for a fiddler's festival to be held in Crockett. It was to be patterned after the one held in Athens.<sup>15</sup> However, the festival was to be more than simply a plan for preservation. It was to be a day of fun for those who listened as well as those who played. The men formed committees which took care of the arrangements of publicity, fund raising, and the securing of facilities. The committees' personnel changed from time to time until they became defunct when the festival in the late 1940's was taken over by the Jaycees. The committee had included such people as Bob Greene, H. V. Trube, Eliza Bishop, Hattie Bell Milburn, and Roy Garner.<sup>16</sup>

The publicity, such as there was, was handled by Tunstall. During the course of his years in the music business he had come to know quite a number of fiddlers in the area. In order to spread the word, he began writing the fiddlers he knew, telling them of the new contest. As things progressed and the operation of the contest changed hands, letters were still sent out and notices appeared in local newspapers, but one rather clever device was added. Tunstall, who was also an amateur poet, began to publish poems with fiddling and contest themes in the local newspaper. For example:

Old Dan Tucker is coming to town  
To swing those pirty gals round and round,  
The Arkansas traveler will be here too.  
So will that sweet little Sioux City Sue  
Little Annie Rooney and her ma and pa  
Will be right here to dance Turkey in the Straw;  
So tune up your fiddle and rodin your bow  
And we'll all crack down on Cotton-Eyed Joe.

I love my apples and I love my plums puddin'  
 I love Ida Red and I love Sally Goodin'  
 Another old tune I love to hear them saw  
 Is that old tune they call "Turkey in the Straw."

Now be sure not to miss this wonderful treat,  
 'Cause ther's many old friends you would love to meet,  
 So gather up your instruments and get them all in tune;  
 And meet me at the fair park the 28th day of June.  
 (1946)<sup>17</sup>

Also:

It's time to get your fiddle out and rosin up that bow  
 That fiddlin' day will soon be here and we are rarin' to go  
 We'll tell you more about it as we plan and time draws near  
 For it's going to be the biggest in this grand old state this year.

For the merchants who cooperate have never let us down  
 And that's what keeps us rollin' as the years keep rolling 'round  
 While Congress and our leaders are doing lots of piddling  
 We'll just tune up our old gords and do a lot of fiddling.

The J. C. boys will be right there to make this day one grand affair.  
 All set up and ready to go when them boys start draggin' the bow  
 And when them fiddlers begin to play watch them dancers rock and sway  
 Here's that man that does the calling, listen to those babies squalling.

So don't forget the 8th of June and meet me at the park  
 You'll hear some good old fiddlin' all day long after dark  
 And all of you who come each year I am sure you understand  
 We'll have the girls from Goree Farm and that prison band.  
 (1951)<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the compositions were not exactly in the style of an Ezra Pound, but they did reflect something of the attitude and outlook of the local citizenry toward the festival. For all its faults, Tunstall's poetry does a better job of bringing out the flavor of a contest than did Stephen Vincent Benet in "The Mountain Whippoorwill . . ."

Other devices for publicity that were and are still being used are handbills, street banners and, since Beta Sigma Phi took over the sponsorship of the festival, television.

The money for the prizes came from the donations made by local merchants. At first, the prizes were meager, no doubt reflecting the hard times of the thirties. The top prizes were \$50 and \$25 and the lesser prizes were various types of "kind," like a box of cigars or a basket of groceries.<sup>19</sup> As times became better, so did the prizes. Later, the "kind" was dropped and only cash prizes were given, with the prize money reaching several hundreds of dollars. There was an exception in 1957 when a fiddle was given as a prize.

At first, Mr. Tunstall also arranged for the judges who usually came from surrounding towns.<sup>20</sup> Tunstall's successor to obtain judges was a past champion fiddler, Jesse Johnson, who had been taught fiddling by Tunstall.<sup>21</sup> At the present time, Johnson is still in charge of the selection of judges.

In the early days of the festival the fiddlers were judged on the tune, i.e., its difficulty and the manner in which it was played; harmony (the harmony produced by double stopping or bowing two strings at once); and audience reception. This applied to both the individual fiddler and the band. It soon became evident that this method led to the "crowd pleaser" "beating out" the really fine fiddler merely on the basis of his audience appeal. So, in 1954, this was changed and for a number of years the contest was conducted on a kind of double standard. There was one set of standards for the individual fiddler and one set (the old set) for the fiddle bands. Things continued in this light until 1961 when the fiddle band contest was dropped.<sup>22</sup>

The new manner of judging started off by giving every fiddler twenty-five points in four categories, (tune, timing, bowing, and fingering) for a total of one hundred points. From this, the judges would begin to deduct points for mistakes they observed. The bow must be held correctly and be properly tilted, and the little finger must be kept folded in. If the little finger sticks out, it is called "letting the finger sail or fly." Notes must be made with the proper finger and the bottom of the hand must be kept off the neck of the fiddle. The tune must be played in its original key and be of some degree of difficulty, and the tempo must be steady with no rushing or dragging of the beat.<sup>23</sup> The three judges sit in the audience with a score sheet and observe and listen to each fiddler. They then tally up his score.

The method of judging used in Crockett does have its critics. There has been some pressure for them to adopt the rules set down by a rather interesting organization called the "Federation of Old Time Fiddling Judges."<sup>24</sup> Their criteria for judging are authenticity, rhythm and timing, tonal quality, and clarity.<sup>25</sup> Notice that all these criteria do not involve looking at the fiddle. It is for this reason that frequently contests which go by these rules have their judges separated from the audience in compartments sealed off from all sound except that of the contestant. These judges identify the fiddler by number only. This way, they feel there can be no chance for favoritism. The feeling in Crockett is that there has to be some kind of barrier that separates the men from the boys. It is for this reason there are sections on fingering and bowing and the judges sit in the audience to observe the contestants.

There are some insurances against the failings of human nature. The judges for the fiddler's festival go through a screening period of about three years. Their competence in playing the fiddle is determined; the opinion of others as to his honesty is checked and his conduct at other contests is observed. The individual is then put on a waiting list to await his chance at being a judge.<sup>26</sup> This is quite different from the days when Barker Tunstall would simply pick the judges for the contest from among his acquaintances.

The contest is divided into three age categories: 75 years and up, 50 to 75, and 50 and under (one year there was a 20 and under group). Each group plays separately, with each fiddler playing two songs, aided by one accompanist. The songs that are played must be traditional (a very elastic term) and there must be no singing or trick fiddling, i.e., playing the fiddle behind the back or between the legs. A first, second, and third place winner for each category is chosen. There is then a play-off between these nine to determine the winner of the festival. The winner of the festival then meets the previous World's Champion to determine the World's Champion for that year. At this

step, each play-off contestant must play a breakdown, a rag, a polka, a waltz, and a tune of his choice. The World's Champion, besides getting prize money, has his name engraved on the large festival trophy, and he keeps a "traveling" trophy until the next year when he returns to defend his title. If he wins three times in a row, he keeps the traveling trophy and is retired from competition.<sup>27</sup>

In 1948 when the Jaycees took over the contest from the committee the title World's Champion Fiddler's Festival was recorded with the Texas Secretary of State in Austin and with a fiddlers' association in Tennessee.<sup>28</sup> Then in the early fifties an attempt was made on the part of a contest also located in Tennessee to use the title, World's Champion. Court procedures were begun and attorneys for the Crockett Jaycees presented Crockett's case and won. The result was that in effect a copyright on the title was gained.<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning the contest was held on the east side of the courthouse which occupied the town square. The program began about 10:00 a.m. At this time the stage was left open to anyone who wished to perform. At noon the fiddlers were given a barbecue dinner in the space behind the local hotel.<sup>30</sup> In those days emphasis was placed principally on the fiddle band (a fiddle, one or two guitars, a bass fiddle, etc.) rather than on the individual fiddler. Prizes for both the best band and the best fiddler were given. However, the emphasis on the band shifted toward the individual fiddler until 1961 when the band was dropped. In the evening after the winner had been selected the east end of the square was roped off and a dance followed.<sup>31</sup> The music was provided either by the fiddlers themselves or by some group hired for the occasion.

After World War II the festival was moved to the city park, much to the delight of the local businessmen who found that it had caused a hopeless traffic snarl. The festival was held on the west side of the park with the fiddlers performing on a raised open platform. The platform still stands but is not used because as the festival began to grow it became necessary to build a new pavilion. This was built in 1955 and is still in use.<sup>32</sup>

After that first early experiment there has always been a musical group from the state prison system to provide entertainment in the morning or between divisions of fiddlers.<sup>33</sup> Two of the most popular of these groups have been the "Goree Girls" from the Goree Farm and the Eastham Farm Prison Swingsters. It is not really clear whether it is their talent or the fact that they are prisoners that accounts for their popularity. One of the greatest successes of the day in 1968 was when one of the singers from the prison sang a plaintif country and western ballad entitled "Please Release Me." Like the prison rodeos, the invitations to the singers carries a message that they are not forgotten and the maintenance of a sense of humor is a healthy sign.

The "outside" entertainment, however, has included something more than what the prison system was able to provide. Most of the time the committee or whoever happens to be the sponsor manages to book the appearance of some well known "country and western" artists or group to play for the dance after the contest and to provide entertainment during the day. This type of music has always been popular in the rural South and East Texas is no exception. A great favorite was the Lighterust Doughboys who provided the music for "Pappy Pass the Biscuits" W. Lee O'Daniel during his campaign for governor of Texas. Houston County was carried handily by O'Daniel, which perhaps goes a long way in explaining the Light Crust Doughboys' popularity.<sup>34</sup> The

story is that these men had been employees of a flour mill and enjoyed playing together during their time off so much that they made their hobby their work.<sup>35</sup> O'Daniel was a flour salesman and when he campaigned his children passed small flour barrels through the crowd into which the crowd was asked to drop coins or bills to help finance the campaign.

The more popular the "outside" group, of course, the more attendance here is at the dance. A good example is the crowd that attended in 1954 when Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were the featured attraction. Wills is perhaps the best known as a pioneer of "Western Swing" and in the 1940's had great success with his recording of "San Antonio Rose." To the average urbanized American this means nothing or at best it is a cue to smile or laugh knowingly but to "country and western" fans, which includes a big slice of East Texas citizenry, it is serious business and Bob Wills and performers like him are "somebody."<sup>36</sup> This particular evening he enjoyed the distinction of having the greatest attendance at a festival dance. This is very important to the contest. The proceeds from the dance go to help defray the costs of the festival and while the day is devoted to the fiddler, the dance is pushed for this reason.<sup>37</sup>

There have been other attractions at the festival beside the fiddle players themselves and recording artists. For a few years, (1952 and 1955) the cowboy film star, "Montana 'Monte' Hale," made his appearance to dutifully sign autographs, give shooting demonstrations, and be a judge (1952).<sup>38</sup> For a number of years square dancing and square dance calling contests were held. There have also been visits by the Alabama-Coushatta Indians. They entertained the crowds with their dancing and by just generally being Indians. In 1951, there was one special occasion for the Indians and Robert John Baldwin, the grandson of one of the founders of the fiddling contest, Terry VanPelt. On this occasion the young boy of two years was "adopted" into the Indian tribe.<sup>39</sup> He was chosen for this honor because he was a direct descendent of Sam Houston and the Alabama-Coushattas wished to pay tribute to a man they had respected for his honest dealings with them. The lad was given the name of "Yellow Pine" and was admonished by the chief's son, Haskell Sylestine, to "be as the pine tree, friend to both rich and poor through the years."<sup>40</sup>

There were also other attractions. In the late 1940's and early 1950's a beauty contest was conducted under the direction of Miss Eliza Bishop, who for many years had acted as secretary to the festival's organizational committee. Girls from Crockett and the surrounding communities between the ages of sixteen and twenty vied for the honor of being queen of the festival.<sup>41</sup> During the Davy Crockett craze of the 1950's, a contest for boys under thirteen years was sponsored by the White Cross Surgical Dressing Company in conjunction with the introduction of their new "Davy Crockett First Aid Kit." The winner received fifty dollars and a trip to Ft. Worth to view the movie *Davy Crockett* with its star, Fess Parker.<sup>42</sup> In 1961 and 1962, there were fly-ins to the Houston County Airport. A complimentary breakfast and transportation to the contest was provided to the participants by the Crockett Community Council.<sup>43</sup> If someone were to declare the festival silly and provincial, the people of Houston County could care less. It is their festival and they will schedule and provide the things that lie within their resources and their tastes. They are not accountable to anyone else for their taste. The music they gather to listen to represents for many a pleasant relief from the sounds of the mass man and his mass culture. For some, it is a symbol of rebellion against the age, a symbol of



individualism. It is not the rootless and anarchic individualism so much in vogue, for it has not divorced itself from its past. It stands proud with a firm foundation in tradition. But for others the music is simply a part of life. They are the differences between "being" and "observing."

Manifestations of an "agrarian myth?" Maybe. But even if it is, there is a certain amount of value and truth to some myths, and what ever its qualities it is certainly one that is believed by a great number of people. For proof all one has to do is tune to a country and western radio station and count the songs which for all practical purposes sing the praises of a return to a simpler life with traditional values. The modern fiddle contest has its message. In its way it also sings the praises of another way of life.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles Farot. "Texas Fiddle Favorites," County Record No. 707.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from E. J. Hopkins, dated Houston, Texas, April 15, 1968. In possession of writer.

<sup>3</sup>Roy Garner, personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 18, 1968.

<sup>4</sup>Josiah H. Combs, *The Folksongs of the Southern United States* (Folksongs, De Medi Des Etas Unis) D. K. Wilgus, ed. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 91.

<sup>5</sup>Roy Garner, personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 15, 1968.

<sup>6</sup>V. B. Tunstall, Jr., personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 15, 1968.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Farot, "Virginia Breakdown," County Record No. 705.

<sup>8</sup>Guthrie T. Meade, "Fiddler's Contests and Conventions," program of the Smithsonian Annual Festival of American Folklife, 1968, p. 33; For a discussion of Henry Ford's influence on fiddling contests see John Greenway, "Country and Western: the Music of America," *The American West*, V (November, 1968), 35-36.

<sup>9</sup>Farot. "Virginia Breakdown."

<sup>10</sup>V. B. Tunstall, Jr., personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 15, 1968.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>Raymond E. Cornelius, personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 12, 1968.

<sup>13</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, June 3, 1948.

<sup>14</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, June 18, 1953.

<sup>15</sup>V. B. Tunstall, Jr., personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 15, 1968.

<sup>16</sup>Raymond E. Cornelius, personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 12, 1968.

<sup>17</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, June 13, 1946.

<sup>18</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, May 17, 1951.

<sup>19</sup>Raymond E. Cornelius, personal interview with the writer, April 12, 1968.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>V. B. Tunstall, Jr., personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 15, 1968.

<sup>22</sup>Roy Garner, personal interview with the writer, September 21, 1968.

<sup>23</sup>Jesse Johnson, personal interview with the writer, April 15, 1968.

<sup>24</sup>Roy Garner, personal interview with the writer, September 21, 1968.

<sup>25</sup>Kelly Kirksey, "The Fiddling Contest Judges," 2-4, MSS in personal possession.

<sup>26</sup>Roy Garner, personal interview with the writer, September 21, 1968.

<sup>27</sup>Roy Garner, personal interview with the writer, April 18, 1968.

<sup>28</sup>Houston County *Courier*, April 29, 1965.

<sup>29</sup>Letter from Roy Garner to the writer, dated, Crockett, Texas, June 22, 1968.

<sup>30</sup>Raymond E. Cornelius, personal interview with the writer, April 12, 1968.

<sup>31</sup>Roy Garner, Crockett, Texas, letter, June 22, 1968, to the writer.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Raymond E. Cornelius, personal interview with the writer, April 12, 1968.

<sup>34</sup>*Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* 1939-1940 (Dallas, Dallas Morning News, 1940), p. 360.

<sup>35</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, May 29, 1952.

<sup>36</sup>This is reflected by the fact that country and Western music brings sixty million dollars a year into the city of Nashville. Nashville has ten recording studios, twenty-six record companies, 265 music publishers and over 1,000 union musicians. Charles Portis, "The New Sound from Nashville," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 238 (February 12, 1965), p. 31.

<sup>37</sup>Mrs. Jo Harkins, personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, June 14, 1968.

<sup>38</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, May 19, 1952.

<sup>39</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, June 14, 1951.

<sup>40</sup>Terry VanPelt, Personal interview with the writer, Crockett, Texas, April 15, 1968.

<sup>41</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, May 25, 1950.

<sup>42</sup>Crockett (Texas) *Courier*, June 9, 1955.

<sup>43</sup>Houston County *Courier*, June 15, 1961.